

Celebrating a century of flight: Who was Roy Kirtland?

The second in a series

BY STEVE WATSON

Air Force Research Laboratory
History Office and

MASTER SGT JIM GILDEA

377th Air Base Wing History Office

You probably know that most Air Force bases named for people honor either military pilots killed in plane crashes or for senior leaders. On the surface, Kirtland AFB seems unique, because our name-sake doesn't fit into either category. But pioneer aviator Col. Roy C. Kirtland did die on active duty.

Roy Kirtland's father, Capt. Thaddeus Kirtland, was a regular Army officer who remained in the service after the Civil War. At Fort Benton, Va., Captain. Kirtland's wife, Virginia, delivered their oldest child, Roy Carrington Kirtland, on May 14, 1874. Roy grew up as an Army brat.

In late 1898, Roy enlisted in the 7th Infantry, and within three years advanced from private to battalion sergeant major. The Army, during its 1901 expansion, promoted Kirtland to 2nd Lieutenant. Over the next few years he served primarily in the 14th Infantry Regiment.

The Army in the nineteenth century was a small organization. In his unit, Kirtland served with such officers as Maj. Leslie R. Groves (later to command the Manhattan Project) and Lt. Oscar Westover (future chief of the Army Air Corps).

Kirtland displayed a personal flair and initiative: in August 1910, his regiment conducted an overland march from Fort Lincoln, N.D., to Fort Harrison, Mont. Instead of marching, Kirtland and another lieutenant rode their own motorcycles. Like the automobile and aeroplane, motorcycles were then a new and exciting technology. The two officers traveled where few roads existed and over rough terrain, in places where gasoline supplies were not readily available.

In March 1911, just over seven years after the Wright Brothers' first flight had enthralled the nation and the world (and two years after the Army had bought its first aircraft), the Signal Corps accepted Kirtland's application for transfer to its new aviation branch.

Kirtland immediately reported to College Park, Md., to oversee the construction of hangars for the aviation school's first aircraft.

A handful of Army pilots who soon arrived at the Army's aviation school had already been trained to fly by the Wright Brothers or Glenn Curtiss. Those pilots included Lt. Thomas de Milling, Lt. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, and Capt. Paul Beck. Milling, considered by most contemporaries to be the best pilot of the period, trained Kirtland to fly.

In August 1911, at the age of 37, Roy Kirtland became one of the United States' first military aviators. Although ten other Army officers had flown before him, Kirtland was the fifth certified Army pilot behind Lts. Frank Lahm, Hap Arnold, Thomas Milling, and Paul Beck.

At the aviation school, Kirtland's primary tasks included serving as secretary or adjutant and instructing student pilots.

During these early heady days, Kirtland participated in many experimental procedures.

In fall 1911, he practiced aerial map sketching and aerial photography.

On August 21, 1911, along with Tommy Milling, he made one of the first nighttime landings.

In early September 1911, Kirtland took aerial motion pictures while Hap Arnold piloted the plane and, in October 1911, Kirtland attempted ground-air communications by means of smoke signals.

As with many of these early pilots, Kirtland had several "close calls. On August 10, 1911, Kirtland began his final flying certification exam. Flying above him, civilian pilot Paul Peck took his aeroplane higher to a safer 1,200 feet. Suddenly, the gas line on Peck's



Pilots of the Army's Signal Corps Aviation School at College Park, Maryland, summer of 1912. Note that Roy Kirtland, center, has his arm draped around Hap Arnold. Arnold is considered to be the father of the modern Air Force.



Col. Roy C. Kirtland, May 14, 1874 – May 2, 1941. Note his original Military Aviator badge.

'The pioneer flyer could learn practically nothing of the theory of flight before he entered upon his training. The practical flyers of that time wrote little or nothing of what they had learned and the students of aeronautics who did publish such books on aviation as were available had little or no practical experience in flying.'

Roy Kirtland in a 1938 letter to Gen. Hap Arnold

plane broke, stalling the engine and sending the craft hurtling towards Kirtland. Peck finally regained control of the plane, volplaning or gliding the craft to a successful landing.

In another incident a year later, Kirtland and Hap Arnold were sent to retrieve a new hydroplane from the Burgess Company's New England factory. When they attempted to take off from Massachusetts Bay, they crashed Signal Corps Aircraft No. 9 into the water. Unlike so many others, they and the aircraft survived.

The Army fliers often met with other experienced civilian pilots, such as the Wright Brothers. aviator Charles F. Walsh visited the school in March 1911 to test the Glenn Curtiss Company's new "Scout" aircraft. A few months later, Walsh "wowed" the folks at tiny Albuquerque, N. M. with the town's first airplane visit.

In March 1913, the Mexican Revolution threatened to spill over into the United States. The Army sent the aviation section to Texas City, Texas to support Army combat units. The fliers formed the provisional First Aero Squadron, which made great strides in reconnaissance, mapping, and communications during Army field operations.

While in Texas, Roy married Helen Parker, the daughter of an Army officer. They had one daughter, also named Helen.

In June 1913, when the Mexican border had quieted down, most of the flyers and aircraft transferred to the Signal Corps Aviation School's new digs on North Island, San Diego, Calif. Kirtland, then a captain, remained and became squadron commander until he and the unit's remnants reached California.

Kirtland was then made the Aviation School's adjutant, supply and ordnance officer, as well as continuing as an instructor.

The early aviation branch suffered almost continuously from stress and strife. A rivalry occurred between Wright and Curtiss trained pilots. Then pilots complained that the Wright C flyer was accident prone and often fatal.

At North Island, these tensions erupted in a minor scandal after Army pilots accused administrators

of taking flight pay, favoritism, and being unsupportive of pilot safety. Overall, the incident reflected the desire of the aviation branch to separate itself from the Signal Corps.

Kirtland was certainly affected by this scandal. Most likely due to a squabble over the Aviation School's finances with his non-pilot commander, Capt. Arthur Cowan, or because his detached duty to the Signal Corps was over, Roy Kirtland returned to the Infantry in March 1915.

Nevertheless, Roy Kirtland's efforts in the early days of the aviation school had certainly helped prepare the Air Service for its first combat duties, when the First Aero Squadron took part in the Army's Punitive Expedition against Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa in 1916.

As for Roy Kirtland, his blemish must have been so minor and the needs of an Army preparing for World War I so great that he was returned to the Air Service in April 1917.

Younger men became combat pilots and his former peers Benjamin Foulois, Thomas Milling, and Hap Arnold received command-level positions.

Major Kirtland was assigned the unusual duty of recruiting and organizing four regiments of American mechanics sent to replace French automotive mechanics. Initially commanding the Third Regiment of Motor Mechanics in France, he later oversaw an Air Service rest camp and served as inspector of aviation facilities in England.

Immediately after the war, Kirtland commanded aviation supply depots at Middletown, Pa., and Rockwell Field, Calif., once the old North Island field at San Diego. In the early 1920s, Lieutenant Colonel Kirtland attended several Army schools, both as a student and as an Air Service instructor. He completed the Army War College course in 1925.

During the tumultuous 1920s, Col. Billy Mitchell advocated that the Air Corps become a separate branch of the military. Responding to Mitchell, President Calvin Coolidge created the advisory Morrow Board. The resulting Air Corps Act of 1926 made organizational improvements to the Army's flying arm. As part of this change, Kirtland became the Air Corps's representative to the G-1 (Personnel) branch



A dapper Lt. Roy Kirtland at the Aviation School, College Park, Md., 1911.

WAR DEPARTMENT
HEADQUARTERS OF THE ARMY AIR FORCES
WASHINGTON

FEB 19 1942

Mrs. Roy C. Kirtland,
901 "A" Avenue,
Coronado, California.

My dear Helen:

Knowing Roy for so many years and taking full cognizance of his early flying and his work on aircraft development, I was desirous of initiating action toward a permanent recognition of his distinguished service to the nation. It pleases me, therefore, very greatly to advise that the large new army flying field at Albuquerque, New Mexico has been named in his honor, "Kirtland Field".

The simple "official announcement" inclosed was issued as the orders of the Secretary of War and I am sending you a copy as I know you will be glad to have it. The War Department, in its recognition thus perpetuates Roy's name throughout the service and the country. I know that you will feel that such recognition is deservedly placed.

With kindest personal regards,

Sincerely yours,

H. H. Arnold
H. H. ARNOLD
Lieutenant General, U.S.A.
Chief of the Army Air Forces.

Incl.
AGO ltr. 2-6-42.

of the Army's General Staff. He played a significant role, as the Air Corps expansion was contingent upon increasing its personnel levels.

From July 1930 to July 1932, Colonel Kirtland commanded Langley Field, Va., a position that also made him figurehead commander of both the 2nd Bombardment Wing and the Air Corps Tactical School.

Kirtland later served as Air Officer of the 9th Corps Area on the west coast, contributing to the coordination of ground and air forces in Army maneuvers and planning.

Finally, he returned to Washington, D.C. to serve in the inspector general's department.

In February 1938, after nearly forty years of military service, Col. Roy Kirtland retired from active duty. He and his family returned to San Diego, where Roy had a home built on Coronado Island not far from the old Aviation School.

But the looming clouds of war in Europe and Asia conspired to bring him and other aviation pioneers back to active duty. Recalled on April 12, 1941, Kirtland was assigned as inspector general for the Army's West Coast Air Corps Training Center at Moffett Field, Calif.

He died there less than a month later on May 2, 1941, a few days short of his 67th birthday, having suffered from congestive heart failure.

In the months after Roy Kirtland's death, Gen. Hap Arnold flew in and out of the Army's new training base and depot at Albuquerque, N.M.

Arnold had maintained a lifelong friendship with Kirtland. He knew Roy Kirtland's contributions to Army aviation, and that his friend had died on active duty in the service of his country.

Arnold, now chief of the Army Air Forces, made

the recommendation to change the name Albuquerque Army Air Field to Kirtland Army Air Field, which became effective in February 1942.

The base again changed its name to Kirtland Air Force Base in 1948, after the Air Force finally became an independent service.

It is eminently fitting for an Air Force base focused on training, research and development, and support to the warfighter to be named for an individual whose military career was devoted to these important missions.

We honor Roy Carrington Kirtland as one of the pioneers of early American military aviation and who helped lay the foundation of our modern Air Force.

Next week:
From airport to air base

